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LIFE OF ALEXANDER MICKLES

**One hundred years
old; fifty-four years a
Slave; forty-six years
a Free Man; the Old-
est Dārky in Missis-
sippi.**



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FROM SLAVE TO PATRIARCH

The Life of a Darky of the Old South

The Life History of a Darky of the Old South.

N December 25, 1811, Alexander Mickles was born in Richland District, S. C., one hundred and ten miles north of Charleston. His father and mother were slaves, owned by J. T. Mickles, a commission merchant and captain in the Mexican War. After the war he came to Mobile, Ala., leaving Aleck, his father and mother in South Carolina, where Aleck's father was employed at the rate of twenty-six dollars a month, hauling stone rock to build the state house. J. T. Mickles collected and used the money earned by his slaves; Aleck's father and mother had five children, three girls and two boys. His mother found employment in a brick-yard for Aleck and his brother, Isaac, for twenty five cents a day and ten cents for odd jobs at night. The girls and mother took in washing and ironing, which all went to the mother. The boys worked in the brick-yard five years. Aleck's mother did so well they were often called free negroes.

The first railroad built in South Carolina extended from Charleston to Augusta, Ga., one hundred and ten miles; it was built of hewn timbers, strapped with bars of iron for rails. Wrecks were frequent, caused from the iron bars working loose from the wood.

When Aleck was about sixteen years old his father asked, by letter, if he and his family could come to Mobile, Ala., where their master was. Mr. Mickles agreed to this, and the long, wearisome journey was begun at once, coming by railway to Montgomery, Ala., where a boat was secured to Mobile.

After landing Aleck was given to Joseph Mickles, Jr., son of J. T. Mickles. Aleck was engaged five years in steam-boat labor, on a run from Regules, La., to Montgomery, Ala. For this labor Aleck's master received twenty-six dollars a month, and

Aleck received pay for Sundays and over-time, which was the rule in those days. Aleck often made as much money for himself as he did for his master. Other slaves made nothing, and have long since passed away, while Aleck still survives.

Aleck is noted, not only as a faithful slave but a life-saver. On one trip up the Alabama river, between the Upper Peach-tree and the Lower Peach-tree, the *Eliza Battle*, at about ten o'clock at night took fire. It was a cold January night and the river was overflowed, being two miles wide, or more. This boat carried about three hundred passengers, a crew of fifty laboring men and nearly two thousand bales of cotton. More than forty lives were lost. A shot was fired on four men who were escaping with a life boat. This was a frightful scene; men, women and children screaming, flames of fire leaping and roaring, while the bales of cotton for several minutes were tumbling into the water. Some of the stronger ones swam to shore; others clung to bales of cotton, a few stood all night in shallow places in the water; others climbed trees and hung on until they were taken down the next day nearly frozen. Aleck tied two bales of cotton together, rescued a gentleman who was swimming with his daughter on his back. Aleck placed them on the cotton, removed his coats, robed the young lady in them, which saved her from freezing, while Aleck himself stood all night in the water up to his neck to save his life. On returning to Mobile the gentleman presented Aleck with fifty dollars. The rescue boat arrived about eleven o'clock next day, just in time to save many lives, for it was still freezing cold; icicles more than a foot long were hanging on trees.

In those days Aleck was a giant in strength. He could handle a bale of cotton as easily alone, as four ordinary men could. In loading cotton in a boat, it was often one hundred and seventy-five feet from the wharf to the bluff. Aleck could stop a bale, hook and tip it on his toe, and slide it to its place with ease. He could, also, take two hooks, place a bale of cotton, weighing five hundred and fifty pounds on his shoulders, and trot forty steps.

When Aleck came to Mobile it was only a small village. Dauphin Street was about one-half mile long. He earned \$5.00 a month in South Carolina, and the first month in Mobile he

earned \$7.00 and declared it the best country in the world.

Common labor was carried on by slaves and Dagoes. In Mobile, slaves could walk over town until 9 o'clock p. m. After nine all caught were locked up until next morning and the master must pay \$1.00 to redeem the slave; on refusing to do so the slave was punished by thirty-nine lashes being given.

Mobile was a thriving town, the price of labor being 20c and 25c an hour; numbers of free negroes lived here at this time. The M. & O. was the first railroad built from Mobile, and was likewise the first railroad built in Mississippi.

In those days steamboat labor was very severe. A slave's daily ration was a pound of meat a day and bread and vegetables in proportion. Those who could not consume the ration were sent back home. Aleck could consume a pound of meat daily and many times at one meal. He was given as much as he wanted to eat.

Leaving the boat Aleck was sent to work under a man by the name of I. D. Dunevin, eleven miles north of Mobile. Aleck earned 50c every Saturday night and chopped ties on Sunday, which netted him about \$2.00 a month. He was engaged in driving a team for Dunevin, hauling ties. His mules were always in fine condition.

Aleck's occupation prevented him from having but little dealings with the Indians. What he learned was that the Indians were an enemy to the negroes. They would watch the fields and camps of slaves to steal the babies and carry them away or scalp them. The Indian is a cunning warrior. He would hide by the roadside, climb a tree or get in a hollow stump, gobble like a turkey that would deceive the white man as well as the negro, and then would kill his man.

The treatment of slaves depended altogether on the proprietor. Some were very cruel, while others were liberal enough with their slaves. Aleck's master was not a farmer, therefore, Aleck did not know much about the treatment of slaves on the farms. Generally, the man who owned about a thousand negroes was kind enough. Colonel Wade Hampton, of Columbia, S. C., owned a thousand slaves, and always treated them as humans; but a man who owned five or six was harder on them, and a man

who owned only a man or woman was really cruel to them. I want you to bear in mind, it all depended on the foreman, or the owner, and the negro slave.

A week's ration for an adult on an average was a peck of meal, four pounds of meat, and one quart of molasses, two blankets which were given on Christmas, other bedding was made by the negro at leisure time. The houses, too, depended on the circumstances of the owner, none were uncomfortable; every man had a pest house and when a slave got sick he was quickly removed to the pest-house and a doctor was called at once.

When Aleck was a small boy the slaves were given two days, later one day a year, and it was only a few years before they were given freedom that they had Sundays allowed.

The industrious negroes cultivated patches on these days, of corn and cotton, or anything they wished. Slaves were given two suits a year, a spring and a winter suit, with one pair of shoes a year. They were allowed to own property, such as horses, cows, hogs and chickens but were not allowed fire-arms, nor were they allowed to buy whiskey except with an order from the master. They could go hunting, if the slave was known to be trustworthy; they were not forced to go to church, but they usually did go. The minister preached at eleven o'clock in the morning to the white people and at three in the afternoon to the negroes out under a brush shed built by the side of the church.

The energetic slaves often got credit until fall. On the first day of January slaves were bartered or sold; a negro could be employed by his owner to another man, or "hired out." This was done at the court-house. The slaves were carried there and the highest bidder got the slave for one year. Usually \$26 on the railroad and steamboat, and \$12 to \$15 in a saw mill, with \$10 to \$12 on the farm was bid. Slaves were sold to the highest bidder. Children were sold at one year old, and often a mother would be sold away from her one-year-old baby; at one year they brought \$500 to \$800; at two years, \$400 to \$1,000; other ages, in proportion; girls from 12 years to 18, \$1,100 to \$2,000; men, scape galleys, \$800 to \$900; good men, \$1,800 to \$3,000; boys, 12 to 20, \$1,200 to \$2,000. Slaves, on being sold,

could sometimes get or were allowed to select their master.

Boys and girls were at liberty to court on Sunday, and were taught how and what to say by the white boys and girls on the plantation. When a boy wished to marry, he first got the girl's consent, then he obtained a recommendation from his master, which he carried to the girls' mistress; if she agreed, it was carried to the girl's master and if he didn't object, a day was set, a fine supper was prepared, the pastor was summoned who read the ceremony from the Bible and pronounced them married. If they lived on the same plantation they lived together, but if the man was on one farm, the woman on another, each remained on his master's place: the man was allowed to go to see his wife once a week, generally. Sometimes a master would buy a man's wife and bring her on his farm, so the two could live together.

Whipping was the punishment inflicted for various offences, on both men and women, and at various places. Women as well as men were whipped in the fields, between cotton rows. Two hundred and fifty pounds of cotton was a day's task for an adult. Failing to get this, he or she was whipped. When a slave refused to be whipped, a day was set, eight or ten white men invited to come, a gallon of whiskey and a plug of tobacco procured; the negro was sent for, but as he usually refused to obey the call, the men would go down into the field and all proceed to fight the negro; of course, they conquered the slave, and then all of them except the negro would drink some of the whiskey, then the first man walks up to the negro who is tied up and beats him until he tires; all of the others do likewise and then the slave's master bores a hole through the plug of tobacco, puts a cord through the hole, ties it around his neck, takes the whip and steps up to the negro and says in a loud voice, "I have come to stay as long as this plug of tobacco lasts." With this he takes a big chew and with all his power strikes the negro four or five blows with the whip. Then he chews the tobacco, rests a short while, strikes several more blows; and he keeps this up until the plug of tobacco is chewed up, taking one big chew after another. The negro is left tied and another slave is ordered to make a water-bucket full of very strong salty brine, which he takes and with a mop washes and re-washes the slashed and

bruised negro until his entire bare body is covered with salt. It may be that this negro will not need another whipping for two years. It is understood that the disposition of master and slave caused severe punishment or an easy life. Obedience is and was the best policy. Many slaves were never whipped at all.

Aleck witnessed all these sights and hardships, but he says he sees but one difference in being under bondage and free, that is a free negro can go without a permit, while a slave had to have one from his master.

In Aleck's early life the white people made all their clothes at home, rich and poor. The farmers were up at 4 o'clock in the morning at work; boys ploughed two hours before school-time and two hours when they returned home in the evenings. The men in those days wore their hair over their shoulders. If one happened to the misfortune to go to the penitentiary, on leaving the pen one side of the head was shaved. This is no doubt the origin of cutting the hair so close. In those days the towns had no barber shops. The boys and girls were economical in dress, plain and neat, but in the fashion of the day.

In Columbus, S. C., was located one of the largest colleges of the times. The daily attendance was about 400. It was well equipped for the times. Twelve was the limit of a room, it was called "tenement," and one negro had twelve students or one tenement to keep in order. The beds were to be straightened, the floors swept, wood and water put into the room, and the shoes were to be blacked. Students had to rise at 5 a. m., go to chapel service, eat breakfast at 7 a. m., and then prepare for regular work which began at 8 a. m. Colonel Davis Gladnier was proprietor of the boarding-house, as it was called. Aleck was put to keep one of the tenements in order and gave satisfaction. Oftentimes a negro was taught to read and write by the students while he was in their room. And when a negro happened to fall into the hands of a good master he or she was often taught to read or write, and they were frequently carried to Sunday School where they learned the letters from their master or mistress. This, too, depended on both the negro's and his master's disposition. The general trend of dispositions of both white people and blacks has not changed much since the war.

Aleck was sent to labor as a section-hand on the M. & O., at Citronelle, Ala., where he worked for six months, and then on the grade near the state line and Buckatunna, Miss. A rush was made to complete the road to State Line by the 4th of July and as this was accomplished a big barbecue was given. Aleck stayed on the grade about one year and then he went back to a steamboat, and then to the M. & O., hauling ties, where he remained more than twenty years. Here is where he met Captain Rich for the first time.

Aleck married Daffne, who made him happy in her young and old age. She was uneducated, but was an excellent cook, and was often employed by wealthy people in Mobile, in Hattiesburg and many other places. She was very kind and at every place she worked gave satisfaction, never having angry words with any one. Aleck and Daffne lived together, happily, for many years, until her death.

When the war broke out Aleck lived at State Line, Miss., laboring for I. D. Dunevin, employed by his master. All those years Aleck stayed at home and worked, while other slaves loafed about the farm and over the woods. When the masters left the farms the women were unable to control all the negroes. White people who continued to work during the war lived fairly well, while those who did not, allowed their farms to go to wreck and much poverty prevailed.

A certain amount of everything raised on the farm went to the army during the war. Women often made clothes, blankets, etc., and sent to the soldiers. Sometimes they parched corn, ground it into meal and sent it to their husbands, fathers and friends. Negroes frequently escaped to the Federal army and would loaf around their camps. And when freedom was given them they refused to stay on the farm but went to the towns and as they could not all obtain work they moved from place to place. They were promised a mule and forty acres of land, supposed to be given by the master.

Coffee sold for \$10 a pound, salt for \$75 a sack, and everything else in proportion, in Confederate money. The third year of the war the U. S. Cavalry often raided the negro quarters and carried all the negroes captured to the salts works; those who

escaped were captured by blood-hounds, the owner of the hounds receiving \$25.00 for his services. Frequently the cattle was found in the woods and killed for beef by the Federals.

When Aleck heard the surrender read he happened to be with his father and mother at John Hugh Perkins, Rawhide, Oktibbeha County, Mississippi, ten miles south of the present city of Starkville, Miss. His father's family now numbered eleven. On the farm were eleven other negroes who left and went into town, while Aleck, his father and his father's family, stayed and made a crop, and each received for his part when the crop was sold, \$50.00. Aleck received \$75.00.

Ike Kinnon who was a former slave on Perkin's farm, went to town to live easy and happy. He heard of the mule and land the U. S. Government was going to take from his master and give to him. He paid \$10.00 to an officer who claimed to be a land agent and in return received a strip of paper that read, "Let Ike have a mule and 40 acres of land where he wants it." Ike wore a beaver hat which had been in use for ten years or more, a ragged coat and pants, a pair of brogan shoes badly worn and full of holes. No doubt, he had expected some trouble, for he had stuffed his shoes with wild onions and was chewing a big mouthful, and spitting spitefully towards Mr. Perkins, when he came up to him to present the order. Mr. Perkins ordered him to halt but he came on until within a few feet of Mr. Perkins, when Mr. Perkins put 15 buck shot in his throat. Ike fell on his face dead. A boy brought the news to Aleck who was plowing in the field. He called the other negroes, and all went to see dead Ike. In this country at that time coffins were few and boards hard to make. Lucky Aleck found four or five boards which were about one and a half feet too short, but which were used anyway for making the casket. It was a dry season and the lime rock was hard, so digging the grave caused much toil, but a hole about two feet deep was chopped out and the murdered corpse was placed in a rickety one-horse cart and carried to the grave. He was placed in the coffin and grave, which was all too short. Aleck found that he could make it fit though by setting his knees up, placing some boards by them on one side the body was covered with two boards which formed the shape of the grave, a little dirt was placed on the boards, which with

the boards made a neat looking grave. It was more than four months before the knees dropped down and left the grave level.

This is only one of thousands of similar incidents which happened during the reign of the Freedman's Bureau.

After the crops were sold and each received his pay, Aleck made his way back to Captain Rich at State Line, where he went into the tie and wood business for Capt. Rich. He labored at this until the engines began to burn coal.

Sam Hooks opened up a turpentine plant at State Line, Miss., and Aleck found employment in this business at once. At this time, 75 boxes was an average day's work, but the first day Aleck worked he chopped 75 in half a day. He had never seen or worked at it before, either. After some experience and practice in the art of chopping, he easily made 75 in one hour. The price of a box was one and a half cents. Three barrels was the average rate of dipping. Aleck learned the trade of turpentine and worked faithfully at it. He rented some timber, chopped the boxes, chipped the trees, and dip the crude from the boxes. He would often take his oxen and wagon to the woods, which was four miles from his camp, dip nine barrels of crude, load on his wagon, and return, unload before night, after having left his camp after sunrise in the morning. Fletcher Hook and Smith Malone, both business men, know these to be facts. Aleck is a small man, his average weight being 175 lbs., but has never been excelled in any kind of manual labor, by either white or black. At the age of 80 he picked up a pair of iron trucks with his hands; the trucks weighed 500 lbs., and no other man ever moved them.

While plowing one day for J. D. Perkins, one year after the war, he struck a horse that weighed about 850 pounds on the head with his first; the horse tumbled into a ditch and could not get up. Aleck looked for help, seeing none, he picked the horse up by the shoulders and lifted him out. This was witnessed by J. D. Perkins who laughed heartily at the sight from his hiding place in the bushes near by.

On one occasion, for Abner Gains, State Line, Miss., he split 1,500 yellow pine rails, hauled them on an ox-wagon a short distance and made a fence of them. He began Monday morning

and finished at three o'clock Thursday. The timber had been culled for more than 11 years. The average rail-splitter will do well to get 250 a day.

Before the war all timber cut was with an ax; stock logs were cut for 10c a log. The average chopping of a day was 25 logs, and Aleck has cut 75 logs with an ax in one day, the logs about 25 feet long and none less than 17 inches at top. Five or six years after the war cross-cut saws were introduced. The first was the Lightning Simon, with a blade about 4 inches wide, later the wider blades came into use.

One day Aleck needed some money for a party. He went to I. Z. Grissom of State Line who employed him to chop stock logs; Aleck began at 8 o'clock in the morning and just at 12 he had cut 75 logs, 25 feet long and not less than 17 inches at top.

Aleck's wife was cooking for Colonel Gains before and during the war. When freed, she remained on there for three years. Aleck came and went to visit her often. While working on the railroad among other negroes he was exposed to small-pox. Col. Gains forbade his coming on his premises until he was safe from an attack. This displeased Aleck and he moved Daffne from Gain's to an old still house. It was a week before Col. Gains found them. Aleck and his wife and three children were invited to make their home back at Gain's but Aleck refused and with the Colonel's assistance built a log cabin where he moved his family at once and began life anew.

One Sunday morning Aleck walked over to his sister's who lived near him, and while he was there a hurricane blew the roof off the shanty, turned over the pots, etc., but no one was hurt. Aleck had told his brother-in-law that his house was in an old storm line; this convinced him and he moved his house.

Aleck lived in his own log cabin happily, work in wood, ties and turpentine for several years. About this time the N. O. & N. E. Railroad was being built. A man from Georgia had the contract for ties. This man's men could not work small timber. Mr. C. W. Rich, son of Capt. Rich, came to the "new road" as it was called, to contract for ties. Mr. Rich found it difficult to get the negroes to come on the new road unless Big Aleck would come. Aleck was dipping turpentine at the time and

making \$4.00 a day. Finally he consented to come. They left State Line and went to Shubuta on the train, then all shouldered their tools, bedding, etc., and started on foot for a place known as Eretta, Miss., where they chopped ties for three months; then to where the historic town on Purvis now stands; here Aleck chopped three months and returned home, walking with two others a distance of 85 miles. Roads were few and the journey was difficult. Regardless of all this the trip was made in a remarkably short time. They left Purvis one Sunday morning at 12 o'clock, and Monday afternoon at 4 o'clock they were at Jones' Ferry, 4 miles from State Line.

Aleck spent one year dipping turpentine in State Line, after returning from the new road (the N. O. & N. E.)

The steel rails had been laid on the N. O. and N. E. about one year and business was opening up. C. W. Rich had procured a location for the manufacturing of naval stores and a saw mill plant at a place known then as Carter's Switch, 6 miles south of the present city of Hattiesburg. It later became known as Richburg, where the Sullivan and Killrain battle was fought. Aleck was ever ready to follow his faithful master, C. W. Rich. He packed his household goods, was on the move to the new road, and the first man landed there to labor for C. W. Rich was Aleck.

Before Aleck came to Richburg he worked three months on Brown's cut about 40 miles north of Meridian. Aleck and his brother worked 7 days in a week. When paid off they returned home. Meridian was at that time but a small town, not over ten small stores and other business in proportion.

The first thing Aleck did was to locate a cemetery. He and Daffne located the one now used in Richburg. One year after this, a man was killed. C. W. Rich came to Aleck and said, "Aleck, we have a dead man, where will we bury him? We have no grave-yard." Aleck said, "I picked out one the next day after I came here," and when Capt. Rich went to the place and saw Aleck's selection, he said "this is the finest grave-yard in the world," and he is about right.

The first work Aleck did after landing in Richburg was repairing and building houses; next was chopping turpentine

boxes. When dipping season came, he would take the dipping crew out. The price of filling a barrel was 30c. Aleck had several children and with his labor all made a good living. He followed this occupation for several years. Aleck always paid his debts and could get credit anywhere he was known.

One Saturday evening, in Richburg, while in a drinking stand, down in the quarters, Aleck had drunk too much and with three others they had a bloody fight in which Aleck received a blow on the head with brass knucks and also a stab in the side. From 3 o'clock in the afternoon until 5 in the morning on Sunday Aleck lay pronounced dead. He had to stay in bed two weeks, at the point of death, but by close attention he recovered.

Aleck homesteaded one and half miles north of Richburg, where he built a small house and cleared a farm. He labored in the turpentine and timber until his sight failed him in 1907. He is now well and can do as much labor as any man on the farm if he could only see.

INCIDENTS.

One Saturday night, while Aleck and his sister were walking home on the railroad they were surprised to hear a star burst. The light shone about 15 minutes and was brighter than the sun. This happened while Aleck was living at State Line.

Several years before the war Halley's comet appeared. It rose in the evening, in the northwest, with a broad tail extending across the world eastward. In 1910, it appeared again, but I could not see it this time.

Aleck remembers an earthquake, while he was in South Carolina. It was severest in Charleston, but he was not near there.

In 1900 one morning he went out coon-hunting about 8 o'clock and an eclipse of the sun came on. It lasted for several hours and became so dark he lost his way and didn't get home until late in the afternoon.

A year or two after the war, while Aleck was living in Oktibbeha County, he saw as he was coming from a tan yard about 9 miles from his home a train of northern men going west. A few gray-coats had fallen in their company and many negroes were with the Yankees. The women often threw their babies by the road-side to die. He saw several that had been so left. Farther on he met an army of squirrels migrating to the west. They were fox, gray and even some black squirrels. It was a strange sight, he says, for they never turned for anything, nor were they wild; they climbed over fences, through fields and even over wagons that had stopped in the roadway. Many were killed by wagons rolling over them.

A short time before the war the deer was struck by the black-tongue. Aleck says he often saw 8 to 10 deer dead in one place. Nearly all the deer in the country died from this disease.

The next night after the birth of C. W. Rich, the home of Captain Rich caught fire. Aleck was sleeping in a cabin near by. Waking and seeing the house on fire he ran in and went to Mrs. Rich's room, grabbed her, baby and bed and carried them to his cabin. He hurried back for the other members of the family, and just as the last one of them had gotten out down came the roof in a flame of fire.

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